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# FREEDOMS REMAINED UNDER ATTACK

## BANGLADESH 2019 IN REVIEW

Bangladesh had a mixed record on human rights in 2019, continuing to host nearly a million refugees and inch towards the progressive realization of economic and social rights while some freedoms remained under attack, Amnesty International said as the human rights organization released annual reports on events in the Asia-Pacific region.

[Human Rights in the Asia Pacific: Review of 2019](#) published today by Amnesty International delivers the most comprehensive analysis of the state of human rights in the world's largest continent.

"The rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly were increasingly restricted through draconian laws that actively shrink the space for dissent. People in Bangladesh continued to be harassed and arrested for speaking out," said Sultan Mohammed Zakaria, South Asia Researcher at Amnesty International.

### **Shrinking Space for Dissent**

Under the repressive Digital Security Act (DSA), which enables the intimidation of dissenting voices, at least 20 people were arrested and nearly 400 indictments filed. The DSA gives sweeping powers to the police to arrest and detain people. In February, five journalists were sued, including one who was detained and later released by the police for reporting on police corruption. Fear of reprisals and intimidation from intelligence forced journalists to self-censor. A young man was arrested by the Rapid Action Battalion and sentenced to seven years for posting a "distorted image" of the prime minister on Facebook. He was later released.

The political opposition was not allowed to organize campaign meetings and political rallies in a violation of their rights to freedom of association and peaceful assembly.

In June, Bangladesh Student League (BSL), the ruling party Awami League's student wing, attacked people gathering for the funeral of an opposition leader of the Jamaat Islami party, injuring six. In September, the police prevented the Bangladesh Nationalist Party from holding an anniversary rally in at least 14 districts.

In October, Abrar Fahad, a student of Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology was beaten to death at his dormitory days after criticizing the government's agreement with India on Facebook.

"Heavy-handed tactics employed by the student wing affiliated to the ruling party demonstrate they have little patience for people who disagree with their views and policies. The risks associated with exercising the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful

assembly are becoming increasingly high in Bangladesh. The authorities must respect and protect people's right to express and organize themselves without fear and repression," said Sultan Mohammed Zakaria.

## **Violence and Extrajudicial Executions**

More than 388 people were killed by the security forces in alleged extrajudicial executions, carried out as part of the country's "war on drugs" campaign. In some cases, victims were forcibly disappeared for months before they were killed in what the authorities claimed were "gunfights." In addition, at least 13 people were forcibly disappeared last year.

There at least 4,732 reported incidents of violence against women and girls, including 2,448 rapes and 400 attempted rapes. In September 2019, there were 232 reported cases of rape – the highest in a single month since 2010.

"A failing criminal justice system and the lack of government commitment to end violence against women and punish the perpetrators contribute to a prevailing culture of impunity. Urgent measures to protect women and girls from all violence must put into place immediately," said Sultan Mohammed Zakaria.

In September, regulatory authorities ordered mobile phone companies to shut down network frequencies inside refugee camps, while the security forces recommended erecting barbed wire fences around the camp, leading to further marginalization.

## **The Rohingya**

Bangladesh continued to host nearly a million Rohingya refugees in camps in the Cox's Bazar district. There were fears they may be forcibly returned to Myanmar or relocated offshore on to Bhasan Char, a silt island.

In November, the wheels of justice for the Rohingya began to turn as the judges of the ICC authorized an investigation into alleged crimes against humanity of deportation and persecution committed by the Myanmar military against the Rohingya population. The ICC could establish its jurisdiction because Bangladesh became a state party to the Rome Statute in 2010.

The Rohingya faced many restrictions within Cox's Bazar, including on their freedom of movement and access to education for children. They were also the subject of a smear campaign within Bangladesh that portrayed them as a "burden" and even a threat to "national security".

"With limited resources, Bangladesh has been a generous host to a million Rohingya people. Collectively, we must continue to show our empathy towards this persecuted community and do everything at our disposal to make the country their home until a repatriation arrangement is reached for their safe, voluntary, and dignified return," said Sultan Mohammed Zakaria.